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Aware I Am Alone: Intersections of Solitude and Mindfulness

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Świadomie jestem samotny. Powiązania samotności i uważności

Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between solitude and mindfulness. Parallels between the two constructs exist, allowing them to complement each other in furthering the well-being of individuals and communities. Three perspectives through which mindfulness may assist in forming foundational understandings of solitude are presented; these comprise *Theoretical*, *Practice*, and *Research*. The *Theoretical* lens provides introductory understandings of both solitude and mindfulness. On this basis, integral parallels between the two constructs are outlined. Next, *Practice* reviews solitude that is fostered through mindfulness practices. Further, additional models for recognising solitude as a part of mindfulness are proposed. Finally, *Research* summarises a current project that uses biophysical data to investigate mindfulness experienced both alone and together.

Keywords: mindfulness; solitude.

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Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule samotność jest zgłębiana przez pryzmat uważności (*mindfulness*). Oba zjawiska – w pewnym sensie podobne do siebie – uzupełniają się wzajemnie w promowaniu dobrostanu jednostek i wspólnot. W tekście zaprezentowano trzy perspektywy, poprzez które uważność może zasilić podstawowe znaczenia samotności: teoretyczną, praktyczną oraz badawczą. Teoretyczna zapewnia wprowadzenie do rozumienia pojęć samotności i uważności; z tej perspektywy zostały integralnie ukazane paralele/podobieństwa między rzeczonymi pojęciami. Praktyczna ujmuje samotność w aspekcie praktykowania uważności, wraz z propozycją dodatkowych modeli rozpoznawania samotności jako części uważności. Perspektywa badawcza stanowi podsumowanie projektu badania uważności doświadczanej samotnie i wspólnotowo z uwzględnieniem biofizycznych danych.

Słowa kluczowe: uważność; samotność.

1. Introduction

The constructs of solitude and mindfulness have received increasing amounts of attention, in both quantitative and qualitative explorations. However, research to date has maintained a distinction between these constructs, investigating them separately. Similarly, increased practitioner use of interventions that incorporate mindfulness and solitude have brought both terms (again separately) within the lexicon of professionals in the field of helping/well-being, and the individuals they serve. Such attention and growth is exciting, yet not without consequences. Within the realm of scholarship, potentially conflicting contrasts may be debated, reflected upon, and/or further investigated. Outside of academia, practitioners may at times navigate competing interventions which, while proclaiming theoretical fidelity, offer dramatically divergent methods and modalities. Illustrative of this dilemma, specifically within the field of mindfulness, are comments from Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator and founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). While acknowledging the acceptance of mindfulness within Western civilization and the effectiveness of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn (2015) voiced concern regarding the growing problem of 'McMindfulness … which ignores the ethical foundations of the meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged' (p. 1). If mindfulness and solitude are to experience continued growth and application for the well-being of individuals and communities, then clearly there is need for thoroughly exploring, if not resolving, such conflicts through both theory and research.

Towards that end, this manuscript offers a simultaneous exploration of both solitude and mindfulness, according to the belief that the constructs have significant parallels which may prove beneficial in illuminating understanding. The course of exploration will encompass three perspectives, beginning with *Theoretical*, transitioning to *Practice*, and concluding with *Research*.

2. Theoretical

Solitude

For many individuals, the construct of solitude remains misconstrued as loneliness. A 2017 article within *Psychology Today*, titled 'The Joy of Solitude: Loneliness as a Subjective State of Mind', begins by stating:

> According to a recent study, many people prefer to give themselves a mild electric shock than to sit in a room alone with their own thoughts. … The pain of loneliness is such that, throughout history, solitary confinement has been used as a form of torture and punishment. (Burton, 2017)

The majority of the article continues to decry the many concerning and potentially maladaptive consequences of loneliness. Indeed, the term and definition of solitude are not introduced until nearly three-quarters of the way through the article, shortly before the author concludes, 'Be this as it may, not everyone is capable of solitude, and for many people, aloneness will never amount to anything more than bitter loneliness.' While *Psychology Today* may not provide a truly representative sampling of individuals' perceptions of loneliness and solitude, the publication boasts a readership of approximately 3,755,000, with a digital footprint of 40 million page views and 13.7 million unique visitors each month (2019). The periodical arguably has an influence within American culture.

Similarly, to investigate the experience of loneliness, the University of Manchester and the BBC led a collaborative research project titled 'The Loneliness Experiment' (n.d.). With more than 55,000 adults and young adults surveyed, the BBC found that less than half of the participants (i.e. 41%) agreed that loneliness might sometimes be a positive experience. Reinforcing this perspective that loneliness is to be avoided at all costs, the study summary provides ten strategies to 'combat loneliness'. Mirroring the small percentage of individuals who consider the possibility of loneliness be-

ing somehow positive, nearly all the strategies aim to distract from or avoid loneliness. Specifically, of the ten strategies, two aim to distract from the experience (e.g. 'Find distracting activities or dedicate time to work, study, or hobbies'), six require the presence of others (e.g. 'Start a conversation with anyone'), and only two suggest that individuals consider viewing the experience as positive (i.e. 'Change your thinking to make it more positive' and 'Take time to think about why you feel lonely'). Such perspectives clearly portray modern loneliness as something to be avoided (Stern, 2015), as the accompanying feelings (e.g., abandonment, self-rejection, 'deserved' absence, loss) can be painful, if not debilitating.

Here it is important to note that the adverse emotional or relational experiences associated with loneliness should not so readily be conflated with the physical reality of loneliness (e.g. being physically alone by oneself, without others). Indeed, most individuals may identify times when physical aloneness was not associated with painful emotions, but rather, a positive affective experience. Such examples may include listening to music at the end of a stressful day; taking a solitary walk through a wood; being individually engaged in a favourite hobby; or dedicating time for individual contemplation, meditation or prayer. These examples call for another perspective on being by oneself, where there is a shared physical reality with loneliness (i.e., away from others), but a stark difference in people's emotional, cognitive experience. From this emerges the construct of solitude.

Solitude has been described as separate from loneliness, and occurs when the individual experiences a disengagement from others (Stern, 2015). Perhaps more importantly, solitude is caused not by social enforcement or imposition, but instead is voluntarily activated by the individual (Akrivou, Bourantas, Mo & Papalois, 2011). Coplan, Ooi and Nocita (2015) further assert that solitude is distinct from social avoidance or unsociability, but instead may be viewed as a non-fearful affinity for aloneness; the individual may even desire solitude.

Adding nuance to this idea of disengagement, Stern (2015) clarifies that through solitude an individual may choose to disengage physically, socially, emotionally, and/or cognitively. Importantly, while individuals willingly 'disengage' in order to enter solitude, in many cases this action may be performed so that engagement with non-present others may occur (Stern, 2015). Examples of engaging with non-present others may include reading a favourite novel alone so that one may connect with a fictional character; visiting a gravesite or memorial to 'talk' to someone deceased; revisiting past conversations; or rehearsing/imagining conversations in the future.

In summary, loneliness and solitude may be viewed as different points along a spectrum of aloneness, with loneliness considered as 'unhealthy' in comparison with solitude – not because of the nature of aloneness (i.e. being physically by oneself), but instead due to the contributing factors and/or affective perceptions of the individual. Similarly, while individuals engaged in solitude may be just as physically alone as those experiencing loneliness, in solitude we would expect to find a more 'healthy' affective experience, once again due to the precipitating factors or events. Having thus laid a foundation for conceptualizing solitude, we turn now to mindfulness.

Mindfulness

The 21st century has seen an explosion of mindfulness theory, research and practice in Western civilization. While mindfulness and other reflective, contemplative meditation practices have long been a part of many Eastern civilizations, the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (i.e. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) may arguably be considered the catalyst which has ignited mindfulness in the West. Mindfulness practices, and their study, are to be found within multiple disciplines, contexts and populations.

Often defined as 'Paying attention in a particular way', mindfulness practices aim to facilitate focused awareness, more than serving as a mythical panacea for the stressors and ills of hectic Western society (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh poetically describes mindfulness as 'A palace guard who is aware of every face that passes through the front corridor' (2008). This description captures the non-judgmental characteristic of mindful awareness, where the individual attends to thoughts/emotions as they pass, yet remains stationary rather than being swept away. Here, 'non-judgmental' may be conceptualised as resisting an automatic, conditioned response to an experience. Instead, the mindful individual is able to recognise present moments as they are encountered, and can practise a suspension of immediate judgments. Such judgments may pertain to stimuli encountered (e.g. noticing a thought in one's attention), values or 'judgments' assigned to those stimuli (e.g. associating shame as individuals *shouldn't* think that), and/or subsequent actions (e.g. suppressing the thought and focusing on shame). This process of recognising or 'attending' to present moments from a non-judgmental stance facilitates awareness of the present moment from a perspective distinct from that of the individual.

Notably distinguishing Western from Eastern mindfulness traditions is the incorporation of novelty production. Langer asserts that more than awareness, mindfulness fosters a flexible mental state where the mind is open to new or novel distinctions (2009). This heightened awareness incorporates the individual's awareness of themselves, their surroundings, and the intersubjectivity of these two elements in their relation (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Such intersubjectivity not only challenges dichotomous judgments, but also encourages previously unconsidered relationships between internal thoughts and/or emotions. Novelty production can lead to increased curiosity, creativity and problem-solving (Pirson, Langer & Zilcha, 2018).

In summary, the review of the literature addressing the Western tradition of mindfulness suggests a definition of mindfulness as purposeful, non-judgmental, present-moment awareness that incorporates novelty-production (Cleveland, 2018a; Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Langer, 2009). The use of mindfulness practices extends beyond the mental health/wellness setting; they are also applied within K-12 educational settings, among others (Cleveland, 2016; Tadlock-Marlo, 2011; Tobin, 2018). As the scope and breadth of K-12 education moves beyond the mere incorporation of academic domains, this is indicative of a more holistic perspective on children (e.g. mental wellness, social-emotional learning, spirituality and religiosity, etc.); thus, mindfulness may be a place of centring, which interconnects all components of student wellness.

Construct Parallels

In exploring solitude and mindfulness, three parallels between the constructs emerge for consideration. These parallels notably extend beyond the realm of definition, having implications for the practice of both solitude and mindfulness. The three parallels here outlined are Intention, Being-With, and Wellness-Seeking.

Intention

As previously stated, the mere state of individuality does not create solitude. Indeed, individuals rejected by others may identify as experiencing loneliness or isolation rather than solitude or aloneness. It would seem, then, that a defining predication of solitude lies in the intention of the alone indi-

vidual (Akrivou et al., 2011). Intention serves just as pivotal a role as mindfulness. Much like deciding to pay a fee for a chosen activity, the mindful individual must 'pay' attention (Carson, Shih & Langer, 2001). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assert it is the intentional action(s) of the autonomous individual (whether physical and/or cognitive) which determine whether or not she/he enters into these reflective states of solitude and/or mindfulness.

Being-With

While solitude may physically resemble a disengagement from others, in actuality the practice can serve as a means of engagement (Salmon & Matarese, 2013; Stern, 2015). Rather than a state of being without, the solitary individual voluntarily engages *with*. This may take the form of being *with* silence; *with* thoughts in reflection; *with* characters in a favourite novel; *with* conversation to a deceased loved-one; or *with* memories. This important contrast between *being-with* and *-without* is just as pertinent for mindfulness. Mindfulness is not an ignoring of sensory experience, but instead an intentional focus on the present moment, by attending to its varied thoughts, emotions and perceptions. Additionally, just as mindfulness cultivates a means of centring awareness where the individual can simply 'be' in the present moment, solitude may likewise foster a reflective state of enstasy (Jackson, 2016; Stern, 2015).

Wellness-Seeking

Finally, a third parallel between solitude and mindfulness might be regarded as a shared orientation towards wellness-seeking. Interestingly, this characterisation might seem contrary to the oft-publicised, misinformed stereotypes of both constructs as means to escape or 'get away' from stressors inhabiting daily life. Addressing the dangers consistent with such a mindset towards solitude, Henri Nouwen (1978) might well have been providing a similar defence of mindfulness:

> It is true that solitude can offer healing to our wounded self, and we may indeed return from solitude more vital and more energetic, but to believe that this is the primary role of solitude leads to false ideas. [For example:] 'The strong don't

> need it and those who ask for it are in bad shape and need to be restored.' … But when things are normal, solitude is no longer necessary. (pp. 16–17)

Studies investigating mindfulness-based interventions (or MBIs), continue to demonstrate encouraging results, thus suggesting the efficacy and relevance of mindfulness-based interventions (Dunning et al., 2019; or Goldberg et al., 2018). However, to only employ MBIs when individuals present physical or mental illness introduces the same fallacies articulated by Nouwen, which implicitly assert that mindfulness possesses no benefits for healthy people (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). For example, a mindset that reserves mindfulness for individuals experiencing trauma or 'too much stress' precludes the role of mindfulness as a protective factor against stressors and negative emotions. Additionally, such an approach shows disregard for the contemplative, reflective states of introspection that mindfulness (and for that matter, solitude) may foster within individuals (Long & Averill, 2003).

Foundational to solitude and mindfulness is the belief that both practices constitute a part of the holistic wellness of individuals and communities. Indeed, it is only through continued, regular practice that mindfulness becomes awareness of self and (eventually) others (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Prior to insight, compassion, or healing being imparted to the self (let alone others), a stable foundation of mindfulness must be created. Similarly, through separation of the self, solitude fosters a reconceptualisation of the self and an awareness of the unity and interconnectedness of community (Long & Averill, 2003; Nouwen, 1978). Once again, however, if solitude and mindfulness practices are to be postponed until an individual is in a state of crisis, this at best limits their benefits for self and community. As Chan (2016) states, 'Truly, mindfulness and solitude go hand in hand as they benefit [individuals'] cognitive and mental state' (p. 21). In short, individuals who practise mindfulness and solitude influence communities in a dynamically intersubjective manner; one in which individual wellness contributes to whole group wellness, which returns to individual wellness via ecologically systemic interactions.

3. Practice

Definitions of mindfulness and solitude have been presented above, as well as three parallels between the two constructs. Attention is now turned to the practice of these activities: specifically, three characteristics of mindfulness practices which may actively foster solitude.

The first element might be termed, 'Alone with Others'. As already stated, solitude may be initially conceptualised as disengagement, or distancing. However, opportunities for experiencing (or practising) solitude abound everywhere, even when it may be challenging for the individual to shut out or silence external stimulation. Salmon and Matarese point out that for many individuals, a dependency on external stimulation may mean that the elimination of such 'noise' only intensifies internal mental 'turbulence' (2013). Recognising mindfulness as one means of addressing this addiction to 'noise', they state:

> Coming from a mindfulness-based perspective, we propose that cultivating a sense of solitude may best begin by simply being where we are and focusing in the present moment. Rather than dealing with the complexities of getting away somewhere, we endorse the value of being present in our surroundings, whatever they happen to be. (p. 337)

Although forms of mindfulness practice are varied, and practitioners/leaders are encouraged to remain open to possibilities, the implementation of MBIs frequently takes the form of small group gatherings. This picture of many selves practising individual awareness *together*, resonates with the idea of solitude as something individually activated with like-minded others. Such groups, and the rapport they foster, help facilitate individuals' voluntary disconnection from the social, mental, and/or contextual 'press' experienced in daily life (Akrivou et al., 2011).

Secondly, through intentional focus on present-moment awareness, mindfulness practices contribute towards healthy experiences of solitude. The element of awareness enables individuals to espouse an inward focus, rather than a mere 'getting away from it all' approach to solitude (Salmon & Matarese, 2013). Once again, solitude is not a shutting-out or ignoring of stimuli in order to simply cease thinking or to 'do nothing'. In focusing awareness towards the stimuli of the present moment (e.g. sensations, thoughts, emotions), mindfulness guides the time of solitude towards attending to both internal and external stimuli, and towards directed reflection. Additionally, through mindful awareness, individuals experience a paradox of perspective. Only by first espousing a 'limited' perspective of the present moment, are individuals able to gently expand their awareness outwards. Awareness presents a similar paradox in solitude, as it is only through awareness of the authentic, individuated self that one is then free to be with 'other' (Jackson, 2016).

Finally, a third element of MBIs that contributes towards solitude is the non-judgmental tenet of mindfulness. Inherent to healthy solitude is the experience of authentic peace, or solitude of the mind (Chan, 2016; Jackson, 2016). Such peace results not from a lack of conflict or tension, but rather from self-examination, reflection, and/or self-attunement (Long & Averill, 2003). Arriving at such reconceptualisation requires navigating internal stimuli with an open, non-judgmental stance. As previously described, a core component of mindfulness is attending to or recognising internal and external stimuli from a detached, alternative, or 'non-judgmental' stance (Carmody, Reed, Kristeller & Merriam, 2008). In this manner, mindfulness facilitates the non-judgmental awareness of internal stimuli, so that the individual in solitude may engage in self-reflection and/or reconciliation.

These three elements of mindfulness practice that contribute to healthy solitude (i.e. alone with others, awareness, and non-judgmental) may be conceptualised in the following illustration. Partaking in a group MBI, participants gather together, all with a similar intention of dedicating time and energies towards contemplative activity. A key component of MBIs is that participants are *invited* into mindfulness exercise (e.g. guided meditation), which once again reinforces the voluntary aspect of both mindfulness and solitude (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2011). Having begun, participants are gently led to directing their focus towards present-moment awareness. Direction begins with awareness being pointed at outer, external stimuli, before gradually shifting towards internal sensations, thoughts and emotions. Intermittent verbal guidance from the leader reinforces the simultaneous alone⇔together aspect of participating in the exercise. In other words, participants are *together* in sharing common space and communally following a common script, while at the same time they remain *alone* with their noticing or recognising of internal stimuli. It is only when the individual becomes aware of the 'other' aspect of their sensations, thoughts and emotions, that the element of being non-judgmental can be practised. For beginning participants, immediate judgmental responses may take the form of, 'I wasn't thinking about my centring breath, I was distracted. I should pay attention'. Continued practice, producing increased and more stable awareness, might yield a focus on emotions: 'My mind keeps returning to anger. I shouldn't be angry'. Regardless of the recognised stimuli, participants are encouraged to release automated, predetermined judgments (i.e. 'I *should* pay attention', 'I *shouldn't* be angry'), and to simply attend to stimuli as they come into focus. Non-judgmental awareness, as though they are noticing from an 'other' stance, allows the solitary individual to engage in self-examination and reflection.

4. Research

This manuscript has highlighted the increasing attention paid to solitude and mindfulness, by defining these two constructs and presenting salient parallels between the two practices. Further, the author has attempted to articulate a vision of how healthy solitude might in fact be an outcome of practising mindfulness activities or mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). So far, this exploration of solitude and mindfulness has remained largely theoretical. Bringing this exploration to a close, the author now highlights one example of research that is currently investigating intersections of mindfulness and solitude.

Mindfulness practitioners are called to be authentic in their guiding and instruction of MBIs (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2011), and a similar call has been made for mindfulness scholarship (Cleveland, 2018a; Tobin, 2018). At times, such congruence may lead to disparate voices even within the community of scholars; however, it is hoped that 'mindful scholars' investigating mindfulness live out core elements, such as open awareness and a non-judgmental stance. The following research project investigates solitude and mindfulness through biophysical data collected from graduate students enrolled in a counselling skills course.

The author (who is the primary investigator) regularly teaches an introductory counselling skills class for graduate students enrolled in mental health provider programmes (e.g. clinical mental health counselling, school psychology, school counselling, clinical psychology, sports psychology), where students receive instruction on foundational counselling skills. The course content focuses on primary 'Stage I' skills (e.g. warmth, reflection, paraphrase, empathy, etc.), and then more advanced 'Stage II' skills (e.g. pattern statements, probes, immediacy, parallel process, etc.), which students can employ throughout counselling sessions (Koltz, 2015). The first two weeks of the course take the form of 'traditional' instruction, with students meeting in the classroom and engaging in lectures, discussions and learning activities. However, the remainder of the course takes place within a counselling lab, with students forming groups of three. Each triad is composed of a 'counsellor', 'client', and an observer. Students rotate through the positions, recording the sessions as they practise learned skills. This role-play format allows students to experience what it is like to function in the guiding role of 'counsellor', to occupy the position of a 'client' sharing concerns, and to espouse a more detached perspective as an observer. For many graduate

students, this experience is marked with high stress, as they may not be used to engaging in open-ended, non-scripted role-play scenarios. Further, these sessions are recorded for faculty review and grading, which frequently adds to the students' stress.

Very little literature addresses role-playing activities within mental health provider preparation programmes. The few studies that exist recognise experiential role-play activities as essential instructional practices (Osborn, West & Nance, 2017), and that such practices can carry emotional weight even though participants recognise them as fictional (Rodriguez et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018). Dennison (2011) highlights that even when such role-playing activities are perceived as stressful, students may prefer these activities as being more 'realistic'.

With this in mind, a regular curricular component of the course involves beginning each weekly class session with a guided mindfulness meditation. Students and faculty gather as a group, engage in a guided mindfulness meditation, and then have a brief time to process the experience before moving on to class activities. The intent is to actively model mindfulness practices for students, as well as to provide an exercise that is aimed to mitigate experienced stress.

Similarly to Pauly, Lay, Nater, Scott and Hoppmann (2017), the current research project explores participants' arousal levels while engaged in solitude and mindfulness activities. Specifically, participants' biophysical responses to guided versus non-guided mindfulness meditation, as well as group versus individual practice, are explored. Beginning each class session, students wear a wrist sensor which captures various biophysical data, most notably heart rate (HR), movement, and electrodermal activity (EDA). While not as precise as cortisol measurement, ECG or fMRI monitoring, EDA data has been used as a reliable marker for consistent, accurate assessment of participant stress (Cleveland, 2018b; Villanueva, Raikes, Ruben, Schaefer & Gunther, 2014). Students are then 'invited' to participate in the group guided mindfulness session (i.e. together in a large classroom), or follow the same guided meditation in solitude (i.e. alone in a lab room). Later in the semester, this same invitation is given, but with the change that both options (i.e. together or alone) provide non-guided mindfulness meditation. A single case-study design applied to participating students will explore students' HR and EDA levels while they are participating in the various conditions of class time (e.g. guided meditation together, guided meditation alone, non-guided together, non-guided alone, engaged in role-play). It is hoped that this quantitative exploration will provide an additional perspective from

which to view the experiences of solitude, mindfulness, and their possible intersections.

5. Conclusion

Solitude and mindfulness represent relevant resources for facilitating individuals' reflection, awareness and growth. Sadly, many people view these therapeutic devices as only addressing trauma, rather than as necessary part of holistic wellness of the self. Recognition of the fallacy of this view has implications that reach beyond the individual to the greater community; as Nouwen (1978) warns, 'this view of solitude, … will slowly paralyze community life and eventually kill the most vital forces of life together' (p. 17). Mindfulness-based interventions, through voluntarily being alone-together, cultivating present-moment awareness, and practising non-judgmental self--examination, may counter such an erroneous view, and thereby contribute to the health and wellness of individuals and their communities.

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